



COVID 19 AND THE DECLINE IN AFRICAN COMMUNAL VALUES:

Religion and Social Media to the Rescue

Bolatito A. Lanre-Abass

Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), is the defining global health crisis of our time and the greatest health challenge we have faced since World War II. In an attempt to deal with this pandemic, hand-washing, the use of masks, social distancing and self-isolation have been recommended and practiced by many. This paper examines the socio-economic and psychological implications of this pandemic on African communal value system particularly social distancing and self-isolation as approaches of containing the pandemic. The paper argues that although these approaches undermine the communal system of living that Africans enjoyed in the past, the need for social distancing and self-isolation becomes imperative when viewed from an Islamic point of view. The paper offers a reconciliation of Islamic social distancing approach with the benefits of the social media as a panacea in handling the gradual decline in African communal system. It recommends that given the spread of the virus, social distancing and self-isolation can both be maintained while at the same time upholding African communal values.

Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), ‘coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Those infected with the virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease and cancer are more likely to develop serious complications’ (www.who.int/health).

The COVID-19 pandemic is a major health crisis of our time being experienced by virtually all countries. Since its emergence in China late last year, the virus has spread to almost all countries and continents. Though cases are rising daily across the continent, countries have attempted to

slow the spread by testing patients, isolating those that are positive, quarantining suspects of COVID-19 symptoms, suggesting preventive measures such as social distancing, the use of face masks, hand sanitizers and hand-washing for up to twenty seconds.

It is important to note that COVID-19 is more than a health crisis given its attendant socio-economic and psychological challenges. A quick look at the countries that are affected suggests that this pandemic has the potential of creating devastating social, economic, and political crises which may eventually alter the world order. According to UNDP report, ‘we are in uncharted territory. Many of our communities are now unrecognizable. Dozens of the world’s greatest cities are deserted as people stay indoors, either by choice or by government order and across the world, shops, theatres restaurants and bars are closing’ (www.undp.org). The implication of this is that communal values particularly in many African countries are gradually been eroded either forcefully, or by choice due to the rise in this pandemic. Consequently, the African community with its inherent communal system of living is seriously affected because an important aspect of the life of its members is gradually declining.

The Socio-Economic impact of COVID-19

Economically, people are losing jobs on a daily basis, airlines are prevented from flying in order to prevent the spread of the virus, inter-state transportation system has been discouraged, and non-essential markets are prevented from opening their shops. The implication of all these is that workers are laid-off as sales decline. Nobody knows when normalcy will return. Many nations that economically rely on tourism now have empty hotels, deserted beaches and deserted shopping malls. Going by this scenario, the International Labour Organization estimates that over 195 million jobs may be lost globally (www.undp.org).

COVID-19 has sparked fears of impending economic crisis and recession. Social distancing, self-isolation and travel restrictions all have the consequence of decrease in the workforce across all economic sectors and caused many jobs to be lost. Schools have closed down and the need for commodities and manufactured products has decreased. This has implications on nutrition due to the lack of free school meals provided in many countries to children from low income families, social isolation, and drop-

out rates with students less likely to return once closures end and an impact on childcare costs for families with younger children. (Nicola et.al. 2020). Many tutors are also at the verge of losing their jobs due to long-time school closure. This has also extended to many privately-owned organizations that cannot sustain payment of wages to workers. The consequence is laying-off of workers with its attendant effect of a rise in unemployment level in the country.

Contrastively, the need for medical supplies has increased significantly. The food sector has also witnessed increasing demand due to panic buying and stockpiling of food products (Nicola et.al. 2020). COVID-19 has caused an unprecedented challenge for healthcare systems worldwide. In particular, the risk to healthcare workers is one of the greatest vulnerabilities of healthcare systems worldwide particularly in countries such as Nigeria where personal protective equipment are not adequately provided for healthcare workers.

In addition, hospitality, entertainment, tourism and aviation industry are the most hard-hit with workers facing potential devastating hardships. For instance, as a result of travel bans, many aviation workers are presently experiencing unemployment and the aviation sector is presently grappling with an unprecedented wave of cancellations and a significant drop in demand amid strict governmental instructions to implement social distancing and the restriction of unnecessary travel. Globally, border closures are on the rise and interstate travels are restricted in many countries particularly Nigeria. Furthermore, COVID-19 has had serious impact on sporting activities as some of the world's largest sporting events such as Euro 2020, Tokyo 2020 Olympics, Australian Formula one Grand Prix and other sporting activities anticipated for the latter part of the year 2020 have been cancelled.

Talking about family dynamics, the social impact of the pandemic on the family cannot be underestimated. According to BBC internet report of 7th April 2020, lockdown and social distancing measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have heightened fears of increasing domestic violence which includes physical, emotional and sexual abuse (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news>). The concentrated time spent in Lockdown means that vulnerable people are more exposed to abuse and it is more difficult for them to seek help. Marital conflict was also at its increase during the lockdown as couple complained about nagging spouses.

Psychologically, mental health issues are on the increase for many are afraid of contracting the virus and the hopelessness of not being able to develop a timely vaccine that can cure the pandemic heightens the fear of many.

With fears of a new recession and associated socio-economic problems such as financial collapse and degeneration, times like these call for resilience and strong communal bond which will cushion the effect of depression and isolation which is foreign to Africa where each person is seen as his brother's or sister's keeper.

African Communal Value System

The defining characteristic of traditional African societies is communitarian. Communitarianism emphasizes the values of specifically communal and public goods and conceives of values as primarily rooted in communal practices (www.iheu.org).

Communitarians are of the view that the community rather than the individual, the state or the nation is the ultimate originator of values and in their analysis of human rights, group or communal rights rather than individual rights are emphasized. They stress 'the need to foster neighbourhood associations, create communal ties, promote public health, and develop national goals' (Beauchamp and Childress 2001:369). Contemporary communitarians reject the central tenets of liberalism due to its commitment to individuality, autonomy and what liberal individualists protect as personal rights. Communitarians thus believe that liberals miss the essence of morality by unduly emphasizing abstract principles and abstract agents, while failing to see that both principles and agents are products of communal life (Beauchamp and Childress 2001:365).

Pointedly, Communitarians take a stance far less opposed to autonomy and individual rights. J.L. Mackie for instance appeal to 'inter-subjective standards' which explains that community-wide agreements form the basis of acceptable moral rules and that these inter-subjective agreements cannot be further validated or invalidated by appeal to rationality' (see Beauchamp and Childress 2001:365). Mackie understands morality in terms of social practices that express what the community demands, allows, enforces and condemns.

Mackie's position explains the prominent themes in contemporary communitarian theories which centres on the influence of society on individuals and the roots of values in communal history, traditions and practices. Much of what a person ought to do in communitarian societies is determined by the social roles assigned to or acquired by this person as a member of the community. Understanding a particular system of moral rules requires adequately comprehending the community's history, sense of cooperative life, and conception of social welfare (Beauchamp & Childress 2001:364).

A communitarian ethos is embraced by many African societies as a solution to the alienation and disintegration of ethical values and social institutions in modern life. Many African scholars are of the opinion that the roots of a communitarian ethos can be traced back to indigenous African societies with a social structure which was communitarian in character. Leopold Senghor for example explains that 'the Negro African society is communal because it is a communion of souls rather than an aggregate of individuals. Negro African societies put more stress on the group than on the individual, more on solidarity than on the activity and needs of the individual, more on the communion of persons than their autonomy' (Senghor 1964:34).

Senghor's emphasis on the communal nature of Africans is similar to that of Julius Nyerere who advocates Ujamma (African Solidarity) as the ideal of social solidarity where people agree to subordinate their individual interests to the interest of the common objective of the collective. Nyerere maintains that Ujamma emphasizes 'the Africanness of the politics we intend to follow, it brings to the mind of our people, the idea of mutual involvement in the family and regards all human beings as members of this ever extending family-hood' (Nyerere 1968:2).

In an attempt to throw more light on Nyerere's claim, Chukwudum Okolo explains that the African, through cultural upbringing is not individualistic and 'there is no question of rugged individualism in outlook and lifestyle so characteristic of the European or the American' (Okolo 1985:397). Human persons are intrinsically communal beings embedded in a context of social relationships and have common values, interests and goals.

The above analyses by African scholars serve to explain the essence of the individual and the fact that the African understanding of the human community plays a crucial role in the individual acquisition of full personhood. When applied to COVID-19 pandemic, one would realize that many

of the values that support full personhood are gradually being eroded during this period because individuals who were initially subjected to the normative power of the community through constant interaction with others, are now consistently isolated and distanced in order to avoid being infected with the virus. In order to continue to maintain our heritage as Africans who are not only deeply religious but also constantly embedded in a network of relationships, it is imperative to utilize the benefits of religion coupled with that of social media such as, Zoom, Whatsapp video call, Facebook, Twitter and so on while at the same time taking cognizance of the Islamic recommendation of isolation and social distancing when there is an outbreak of any pandemic. This will aid in containing the spread of the virus and at the same time continue to maintain relationships with loved ones.

Harnessing Religious and Social Media Benefits during COVID-19 Pandemic

Islamic Response to Pandemics

Islam has been handling pandemics for more than one thousand four hundred years and the tradition of the holy prophet Muhammad (SAW), demonstrated that the control of pandemics is inherent in Islamic practices. Aizaz Khan (2020) highlights some of prophet Muhammad's teaching regarding pandemics.

Travel ban:

The holy prophet recognized and preached the importance of travel bans and quarantine in places contaminated with a pandemic or any disease in order to mitigate the spread of such a pandemic. According to the prophet "if you hear of an outbreak of (a) plague in a land, do not enter it; and if the plague breaks out in a place while you are in it, do not leave that place" (hadith: Sahih al-Bukhari). The implication of this is that in the event of any pandemic, it is absolutely necessary that we 'assume the worst until we know otherwise and act accordingly' (Khan 2020). Therefore strict travel bans imposed as a way of mitigating the spread of COVID-19 is a case in point.

Social distancing:

The holy prophet also practiced social distancing as a way of mitigating the spread of pandemics like COVID-19. It was reported that a leprous man once wished to pledge his allegiance to the prophet and this required touching and holding the prophet's hand. But the prophet rather sent words to him while keeping his distance that his pledge had already been accepted and that he should return home, (hadith: Sunan Ibn Majah).

Isolation/staying at home:

Concerning isolation, the holy prophet taught that those who are sick should not in any way compromise the community at large. According to him: 'do not place a sick patient with a healthy person and at the level of nonhuman animals, even the cattle suffering from a disease should not be mixed with healthy cattles' (hadith: Sahih al-Bukhari). Since social distancing and isolation were both religious injunctions during the time of the prophet, muslims practiced them. This is quite unlike our present circumstances in Nigeria where it is difficult for citizens to comply due to economic hardships and the need to survive.

The Islamic ruling on isolation that was practiced many centuries ago is similar to the current approach of self-isolation and modern quarantine in curtailing the spread of covid-19 globally. According to Karadas, as the COVID-19 outbreak continues to kill thousands of people across the globe, 'prophet Muhammad's recommendation on how to respond to a pandemic offers a motivation to people to stay put in their homes and protect themselves from this deadly disease' (see Sofuoglu 2020). Karadas views the most important element of the pandemic as that of human contact which can be circumscribed by staying at home in order to reduce the pandemic and its deadly effect to its barest minimum.

Hygiene:

An important lesson learnt from the COVID-19 experience is that of hygiene which entails the proper hand-washing technique and other hygienic practices. This is the hallmark of Islam due to the tradition that says 'cleanliness is half of the faith.' It is expected of every Muslim to perform ablution before each of the five daily prayers which entails cleaning vital parts of the body with clean water. The holy prophet also taught that during ablution, the right and left hands should be washed thoroughly and this suggests a high sense of cleanliness on hourly and daily basis.

Similarly, when sneezing, the holy prophet ‘covered his face and muffled the sneeze, effectively containing the spread of airborne bacteria and viruses’ (Hadith: Jami’ al-Tirmidhi). Muslims all over the world are taught that there is a close connection between physical cleanliness and spiritual purity. Hence the holy Quran teaches that ‘Indeed, Allah loves those who turn to him (repenting) and he loves those who keep themselves clean and pure’ (Q2:V223).

Seeking medical treatment:

Islam has answers to many practical questions and has been viewed as ‘a practical and progressive faith-based religion’ (Khan 2020). The holy prophet has urged many Muslims to always seek medical care alongside their reliance on the power of prayers. He was once asked by a group of Bedouins if it would be considered sinful if they did not seek medical treatment and he replied ‘seek medical treatment, o slaves of Allah, for Allah does not just create any disease but he also creates with it the cure except for old age’ (Hadith: Sunan Ibn Majah). The implication of this is that seeking medical assistance with divine intervention is the key to successful and complete treatment. Hence ‘every disease has a cure. If a cure is applied to the disease, it is relieved by the permission of Allah the Almighty’ (Hadith: Sahih Muslim).

Free Medical Care:

In successfully controlling the spread of a pandemic, free medical care and financial assistance are two major factors to take into consideration during a pandemic. Citizens of a country are more likely to follow laid down rules and regulations no matter how stringent if there are provisions for their health care and social wellbeing. According to Khan (2020) ‘the bait-ul-mal (government treasury) was introduced during the time of the holy prophet. The taxes collected in this treasury were used to provide for the poor, disabled, elderly, orphans, widows and others in need. The government was also made responsible to stockpile food supplies in case of disaster and famine’.

One could see from the above that Islamic rulings on the need to protect people from pandemic that may later result to death has been mentioned severally by prophet Muhammad (SAW). In his numerous hadiths, prophet Muhammad (SAW) has advised his companions to value their lives and see it as sacred over death by urging people to stay away from

places where there were pandemics. The prophet's major aim was to propose an infection control mechanism that calls for both faith and practical solutions to effectively control the spread of the pandemic. One can see strands of the holy prophet's recommendation being adopted in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic globally and this can also aid in improving the way we respond to the pandemic in Africa.

Re-invigorating African Communal Values through Social Media

How do I remain in touch with my family members both nuclear and extended and still maintain the social distancing and isolation techniques of curtailing the spread of COVID-19? Many have taken solace in virtual life. There is no gainsaying the fact that there is need to re-ignite a sense of community that many people have lost during the period of COVID-19 pandemic. How then do we go about it? What beneficial social media devices do we employ during COVID-19 to keep the family together and prevent disunity? What type of information can I pass that will be beneficial to members of my family that are distant to my place of location? How do I pass such information in such a way that it will not affect their psychological state? How can religion impact my social life at these present times? How do I harness the benefits of religious injunctions for practical and meaningful application?

COVID-19 has had a great impact on the way we perceive our world and everyday lives. Actions that are inherently human and those relating to finding comfort in the midst of others are gradually being eroded due to physical and social distancing. Hence, the benefits of social media and religious injunctions have become imperative.

Depending on the location of each person's family members, WhatsApp video call, email, Facebook, Instagram, Facetime and Zoom call (meeting) can be employed in informing them about important and relevant updates relating to COVID-19 and also advising them accordingly. This is presently the right thing to do for such valuable information will help in strengthening one's relationship with family members at this crucial time that they need it most. Family members can be provided with information via WhatsApp video call and Facetime and be constantly reminded about how to: boost their immune system, care for and speak to children at home, deal with fear, stay positive, cope with stress or sleeplessness, pass

the time, protect their family, general information and updates as they become available (Gandolf 2020). It is important to ensure that all communications are informative, relevant, accurate, empathetic and in touch with the current situation and environment.

Social media can also aid in convincing family members to comply with social distancing and consequently help in flattening the curve. There is a lot of misinformation out there and millions of people in Africa, particularly Nigeria still wildly underestimate the seriousness of the virus. Hence the responsibility of positively influencing family members through our social media accounts in order to stay in touch and avoid the gradual erosion of African communal lifestyle.

Social media can be used in alleviating the fear of family members who are afraid of contracting the virus. Due to a lot of mixed messages and misinformation, some family members may be confused about what they should do if they think they have COVID-19. For some, apart from the general advice of hand-washing coupled with social distancing and self-isolation, the appropriate course of action depends on community. But many want answers to questions such as: what are COVID-19 symptoms and should I get tested? Where in my community can I get tested? Should I stay home if my symptoms are minor? How will I know when it is time to seek help at a hospital? How do I avoid infecting others? What are the risks of the transmission of coronavirus disease at home? Is there anything else I should know about coronavirus disease, diagnosis and transmission? (Gandolf 2020).

Utilizing social media aids in easing the psychological effect of COVID-19. It is important to be empathetic and considerate at this time because many people are going through a series of depressing conditions arising from the spread of the virus. If we are using twitter or Instagram, our communication style and the tone with which the messages are sent is also important; the tone should neither be too harsh nor serious and should be mixed with some lighter content.

Social media also assists in re-assuring family members and giving them a sense of belonging. This can only be achieved by keeping in touch through social media because right now, millions are staying at home spending more time online to keep busy. This is an incredibly challenging time for everybody hence social media strategies can positively influence family members to stay safe.

Thus far, this paper has shown that the importance of religious practices and the need for media intervention to correct the socially disruptive outcomes created by COVID-19 are standard themes which cannot be underestimated in order to continually sustain the communal lifestyle of Africans. Hence, harnessing the benefits of religion and social media will further re-connect family members and this will eventually serve as a form of relief for family members that might likely fall through the cracks and assist them to gain psychological balance and re-energize following this crisis.

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